2000

Thomas P. Flint, Divine Providence: The Molinist Account

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Thomas P. Flint, ***Divine Providence: The Molinist Account*** [Cornell Studies in the Philosophy of Religion]. Ithaca, NY and London: Cornell University Press, 1998, xi and 258 pages, Hb $35.00.

The last quarter century has seen a notable upsurge of interest among analytical philosophers of religion in the 16th-century Jesuit theologian Luis de Molina and his notion of divine 'middle knowledge', so-called because its modal reach lies somewhere between an a priori knowledge of necessary truths and an a posteriori knowledge of contingent facts. The objects of middle knowledge are 'counterfactuals of freedom', subjunctive conditionals of the form, 'Were condition C to obtain, agent X would (freely) perform action A'. If divine omniscience includes middle knowledge, then God not only knows what every actual agent has done, is doing, and will do, but He also knows what those agents (and indeed, any possible agent) *would* do in any set of circumstances in which they might find themselves. Clearly a God endowed with middle knowledge is not only *smarter* than a God who lacks it (reason enough to ascribe such knowledge to Him); He is also more *competent* in securing His ends, since this knowledge (unlike knowledge of what is, was, and will be) is available to Him prior to the actualization of a particular world, and can thus guide Him as He determines which initial conditions to create and which subsequent interventions to undertake. Middle knowledge is controversial, for various reasons, but there is clearly a good deal riding on the controversy.

Thomas Flint, a leading proponent of 'Molinism', has written a stimulating exposition and defense of middle knowledge. The book is divided into three parts. In the first part Flint shows how Molinism arises naturally out of the traditional Christian interest in ascribing to God the greatest sovereign control which is compatible with genuinely free human agency. If free agency is understood in libertarian terms (as Flint maintains that it should be), God cannot *cause* us to do of our own free will what He would like us to do; the best He can do is bring about the conditions in which we would freely do what He desires, and He can bring about those conditions only if He knows what they are. It is middle knowledge (not knowledge of the past, present, and/or future) which enables Him to identify those conditions. Middle knowledge does not give God everything He would like: among the things it reveals to Him (regrettably enough) is that there are *no* conditions under which everyone will freely act in optimal ways. But it does enable Him to secure the best 'feasible' (as opposed to the best logically possible) outcome.

The second and longest section of the book defends Molinism from various threats, beginning with the blandishments of alternative accounts.

Flint places Molinism on a map of providential theories, with Thomism and 'the open view' (which denies both middle knowledge and foreknowledge in favor of divine risk-taking) as its principal rivals. Thomism provides God even more providential control than Molinism but at the price (Flint argues) of an unacceptably attenuated conception of free agency, while 'openism' receives high marks for its stand on free agency but leaves God too little control over events (even less, Flint argues, than the 'openists' advertise). Given the troubles afflicting its rivals, Molinism is the clear-cut winner unless it can be shown to suffer from crippling defects of its own. The bulk of the section is therefore devoted to three critiques of Molinism: "the 'grounding' objection," "Hasker's attack," and "Adams and vicious circle arguments." What these three objections have in common is the idea that the relevant conditionals and the way they function in the Molinist scheme are actually incompatible with libertarian agency. Flint offers some powerful counterattacks, which anti-Molinist objectors will not have an easy time answering.

The third section is devoted to 'applied Molinism', exploring some of the uses to which middle knowledge can be put. Here Flint goes beyond the general theological advantage of middle knowledge adumbrated earlier in the book to examine some specific issues surrounding the exercise of divine providence, namely, papal infallibility, prophecy, unanswered prayers, and praying about the past. In each case he finds unexpected difficulties to solve along the way, but shows in the end how the resources of Molinism are adequate to the task.

How well does Flint carry off his project? Better than this friendly skeptic would have thought possible. Nevertheless, there are at least a couple of points at which Flint's defense of Molinism is not quite as decisive as he would like it to be. In the first place, a balance-sheet defense of Molinism depends crucially on the comparison with its rivals' balance sheets, and Flint errs in treating 'openism' as Molinism's only real rival (at least among theories which take free will seriously). This ignores the traditional middle ground which affirms divine foreknowledge while denying (or failing to recognize) middle knowledge. Flint apparently agrees with the 'openists' that foreknowledge is providentially useless, but this is implausible on its face. (Think how much of our own attempts to control the future are guided by guesses about what other agents will do. Wouldn't these attempts be more effective if we could *know* and not just guess?) Foreknowledge cannot secure all the providential benefits of middle knowledge, to be sure, but it does give God more control than present knowledge alone. This makes it, and not 'openism', the preferred fallback position should Molinism founder on the charge of conceptual incoherence.

In the second place, Flint's defense of Molinism does not dispel the fundamental suspicion which drives the grounding objection. The most straightforward version of the objection is this. For the counterfactual C > A to be true, A must be true in the closest (most similar) world(s) to W_α (the acutal world) in which C is true. Call this world, which "grounds" the truth of C > A, W_1. But if A is an exercise of libertarian free agency in W_1, there must be a world just like W_1 (up to the last moment at which the agent is still free with respect to A) but in which not-A. Call this world, required by the libertarian character of A, W_2. This presents a prima facie problem for Molinism. On the one hand, for C > A to be true, W_1 must be closer to W_α than is W_2. On the other hand, it's hard to identify any difference between W_1 and W_2, relevant to evaluating the counterfactual C > A, in virtue of which W_1 is closer than W_2 to W_α. (They will differ with respect to A, but this is both an irrelevant difference and also one which, even if relevant, could work just as well to the advantage of W_2, depending on whether it is A or not-A that is true in W_α.) Flint suggests as a relevant difference that C > A itself is true in W_α (and W_1) but not in W_2. But since it is the truth-conditions of C > A that are in question, this is little different than saying that the counterfactual is *just true* and that's all there is to it – a position Alvin Plantinga has at least entertained, but which Flint wishes to avoid. It is doubtful that anyone troubled by the grounding objection in the first place will be much relieved by this answer.

What Flint does accomplish, however, he accomplishes most impressively. His are the arguments that anyone involved in the debate over Molinism will now have to engage, while even readers with little interest in divine providence may find the book worth studying just for its insights into explanatory priority, counterfactual power, and similar topics of general interest.

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